

## Experiences of a Somnambulist.

BY MISS MAUDE CROSSLAND.

The exciting experience of a young girl in Queensland. A story of a thrilling chase and fearfully anxious moments in hiding.

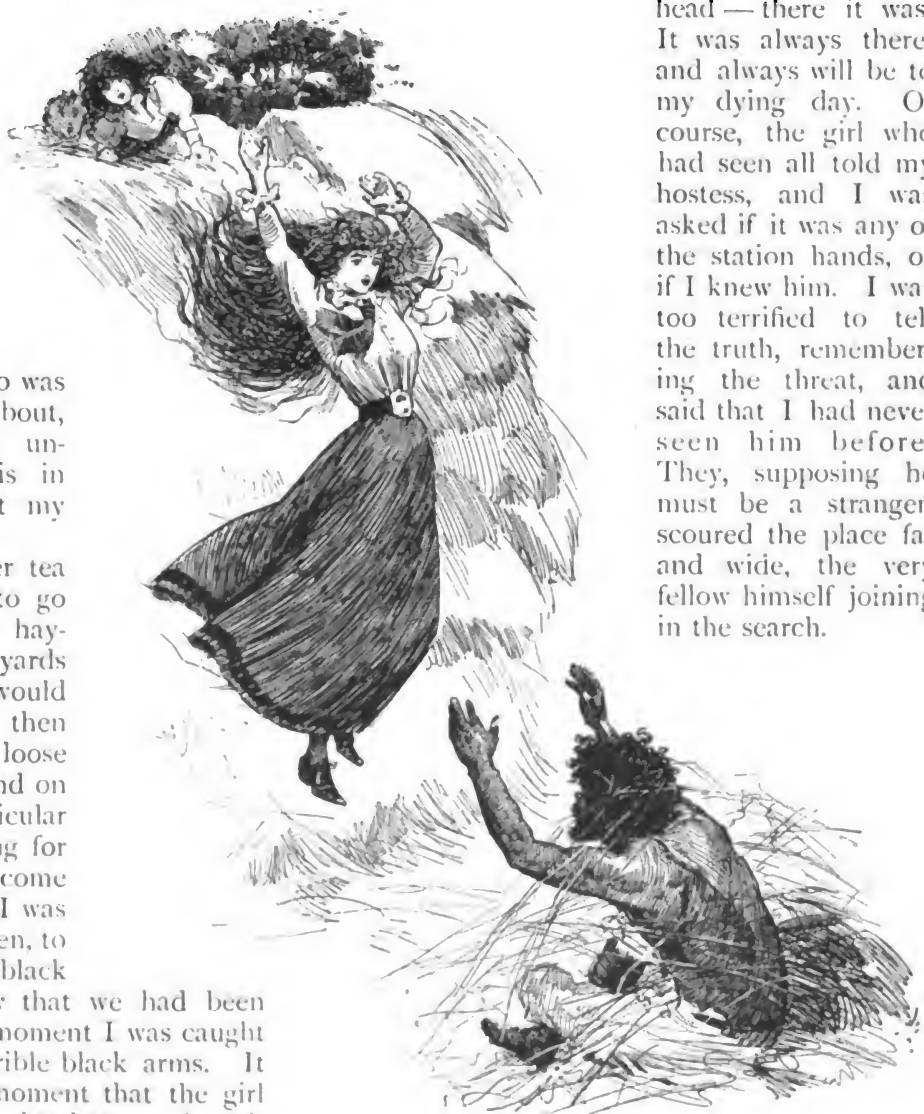


It has occurred to me that it might interest the readers of this Magazine to hear some of the more startling adventures which a somnambulist has been through. I had always walked in my sleep since I was a child, but nothing very remarkable happened to me until I was sixteen years old, seven years ago. I was then staying on a station in the back blocks of New South Wales (Gundagai district), thirty-six miles from any town, and twelve or fifteen miles from any habitation but that of blacks. The place simply swarmed with blacks: in fact, all the hands on the station were blacks. Now, I was in continual terror of these fellows, and especially of a tall, powerful Queenslander, who was constantly following me about, turning up in the most unexpected places; and it is in connection with him that my first experience began.

It was our custom, after tea in the summer evenings, to go playing on and about a haystack some two hundred yards from the house. We would clamber up one side and then jump down on to some loose straw that lay on the ground on the other side. On this particular night we had been frolicking for about five minutes. It had come to my turn to jump, and I was half-way through the air when, to my horror, I saw a great black head rise out of the straw that we had been jumping on, and the next moment I was caught and held tightly in two horrible black arms. It was well for me at that moment that the girl who was next to jump saw what happened, and,

screaming in terror, fled with all the others at her heels. The Queenslander (for it was he), muttering fiercely in my ear that if I told he would kill me, dropped me violently.

I knew no more till I found myself, an hour later, tucked up in bed. I cannot describe the horrible feeling of fear that took hold of me. Everywhere I looked I could see that dreadful head emerging from the bed of straw. Close my eyes, cover my head — there it was. It was always there, and always will be to my dying day. Of course, the girl who had seen all told my hostess, and I was asked if it was any of the station hands, or if I knew him. I was too terrified to tell the truth, remembering the threat, and said that I had never seen him before. They, supposing he must be a stranger, scoured the place far and wide, the very fellow himself joining in the search.



"I SAW A GREAT BLACK HEAD RISE OUT OF THE STRAW."

That night my hostess, seeing the terrible state I was in, took me to sleep in her room, and the next day I followed her about, never leaving her side for an instant. That night I again slept in her room; and now comes the most thrilling part of my tale. I remember keeping awake till nearly two o'clock. My nerves had undergone such a shock the evening but one before that, do what I would, I could not go to sleep. Then I dropped to sleep, or thought I did, and dreamed that I was again playing on the haystack, and going through the same horrible experience, and that this time the man had caught me and was carrying me away, running with me swiftly through the bush. I thought it was raining, and that he was running along a cattle-track up a steep hill in a dense scrub, when he slipped and fell, the fall loosening his hold of me. Before he had time to catch me I was up and flying for my life down the hill the way we had come, when my long hair caught in some briars and held me tightly. And now in another minute he would be up with me, when, with an effort, I tore myself free, leaving almost half my hair sticking in the briars.

On I rushed—I could almost feel the dreadful creature's breath upon my cheek—when with a plunge I suddenly realized that I was up to my knees in water. Oh, horror of horrors! The shock of the water awakened me, and I found myself, clad only in my night dress, standing in a creek that ran a mile or more from the homestead, and within a few paces of me stood that terrible black fellow — no dream, but a living reality, and his hand outstretched to grasp me! I stood almost petrified, not knowing what to do.

There I stood, in the dead of night, in the lonely bush, far away from the house, the great tall black pines that grew along the banks hemming me in and making the water which I stood in appear as black as ink. But blacker still

was the horrible thing that stood glaring at me from the bank. Great heavens, what was I to do? Turn whichever way I would, I knew what the end must be, for he would catch me. Once I thought of falling where I stood and drowning, but, when I nearly put my thought into action, I reflected that, even if I did so, he would seize me before I had time to drown.

And now he became impatient, and commenced wading towards me. At the very sight of those horrible arms, which he again stretched out, terror seemed to give me strength, and with a loud cry, I turned and rushed up the bank. I can never tell you how I ran! My feet seemed to fly. On I flew through a dense growth of thistles whose thorns tore at and lacerated my feet, but I heeded them not. Anything was better than to be left to the mercy of the dreadful monster that came panting behind me. I was a swift runner, and as I ran, the thought struck me that, if I could only dodge him, I might even then escape. Almost before I knew what I was doing, I had turned off a little to the right, and ran back to the place where I had started from. When I reached it, I stood and listened. He had found out what I had done, and came crashing back.

For a second I stood. I knew that if I crossed the stream and ran up the bank he must see my white night-dress. My God! there he was, emerging from the thistles into the opening. He had seen me, and with a yell was coming on at full speed towards me. Now all fear seemed to leave me, and, with a



prayer that God would let me drown rather than leave me at the mercy of this dreadful creature, who was pursuing me under such fearful conditions, I seemed to fall rather than throw myself into the water, and I sank immediately. After an interval, which appeared to be an eternity, but was really only a second or two, I rose again, and was carried on down the stream.

Before I go any further, I might state that my hair is very long and thick, reaching far below my knees. It was my custom to brush and leave it hanging loosely before going to bed. Now, instead of catching in briars as in my dream, it became entangled in the wire of a bridge which, at this point, crossed the stream. It consisted simply of two parallel wires stretched from bank to bank, and covered with slabs of stringy bark. For a while I washed to and fro, held tightly by my hair, and all this time the same numb feeling that I experienced when I fell or sprang from the bank possessed me, and I felt not the least fear. I remember thinking, in a calm kind of way, that hanging as I was by my hair, with my head and shoulders out of the water, it was impossible for me to drown. Yet this did not seem to trouble me either. I felt quite content.

Presently I was brought back to reality by a muttering sound just above my head. I looked up, and standing on the bridge, which was swaying to and fro under his weight, was that black fiend. Then the horror of the situation again took hold of me, and I remembered all. My sense of horror and loathing knew no bounds. Had he seen me? Was I, after all, to be left to his mercy? But no, he was walking on, still muttering savagely, the bridge swaying from side to side under his feet, and pulling me backwards and forwards at every swerve. Now, I knew that if once he got to the other side and looked back, which he was sure to do (for was he not looking for me?), all would be lost, for my white night-dress would surely betray me. Then it was that I noticed a hiding-place under the bridge where it joined the bank. If I could only get to that! But my hair held me inexorably. God in Heaven! what was I to do? In another minute he would be across. Seizing my hair, I tore at it with my hands and teeth, for I believe I was mad in my terror. Finally I broke loose, and, more dead than alive, crawled up under the bridge—not one single moment too soon; for almost as I reached it, it gave a final swing and ceased rocking.

To understand more fully the position of my hiding-place, it is necessary to describe more accurately the make and position of the bridge. As I have stated, it consisted of

two parallel wires stretching from bank to bank, twisted and fastened on one side to a couple of stout oaks. The end of the bridge under which I was hiding extended a considerable distance on to the sloping bank, being fastened at this end to two sunken posts. There was also another wire extending from bank to bank, about 4ft. higher than the bridge. This, persons crossing, were obliged to hold fast to, to prevent themselves from being jerked by the swaying motion of the bridge into the waters beneath. It was this wire that had caught and held my hair. It had snapped some time or other, and had been roughly twisted with other jagged ends to a portion of the bridge a yard or so from the bank. The creek was flooded at this time, the water being almost on a level with the bridge. Hence my coming in contact with and being caught by the wire as I floated along.

My readers will know that beneath almost all bridges where they join the bank there is a kind of hollow, or recess. It was into this that I crept, completely spent. And thanks to the *débris* that the flood had left behind, together with a thick growth of docks and nettles, I felt that unless my fearful pursuer came by the very opening through which I had entered, he would never find me. For here the bark drooped at either side of the bridge and had become firmly embedded.

How dark it was! So dark, indeed, that I could not see my hand. The horror of it all comes back to me now as I write, making me sick and faint. Can anyone picture my agony as I crouched there, not knowing the minute that horrible hand would be thrust through to grasp me? And then another horror seized me, and I remembered that only that afternoon when we girls had come down with the sledge to watch the men drawing water, a great brown snake had been seen coiled up beside a rock. The men ran with their whips to kill him, but he was too quick for them, and actually ran under the very place where I had taken refuge. Almost simultaneously with this thought something cold touched my naked feet, seeming to freeze the very blood in my veins. How I kept from screaming and rushing from the place, I do not know to this hour. But I mastered my impulse, thinking it was better for me to die where I was, terrible as it must be, than to face the fate which awaited me at the hands of my dreaded pursuer.

I tried to pray, but could not, so sat on there, my despair and terror too great to describe. Up to this, from the time I entered my hiding-place I had not heard a sound, and this made it all the more terrible, inasmuch as I could not

tell where that fearful creature might be. He might even then be watching me and gloating over my misery; his hand at that moment might be gliding through the darkness to clutch me. Where, oh, where, was he? Could it be possible that, thinking me drowned, he had gone back to the house? Or was he in some place near at hand, silently watching, perhaps suspecting that I was hidden, and waiting for me to show myself? Great heavens! the suspense was awful.

My last surmise proved correct, for at that instant I heard a cracking noise as of breaking twigs, followed by stealthy footsteps, and then deep breathing.

At that point, unable to bear any more, I swooned. I do not remember any more till I was brought to myself by the sound of a loud, prolonged "coo-ee." I listened breathlessly. There it was again, and yet again. It appeared to be getting closer. And now the cracking became louder, the dense darkness slowly but

fours through the opening, was the hideous Queenslander. The light had indeed revealed my hiding-place. Craning his neck, he glared horribly around. I sat as if turned to stone, my gaze fascinated, utterly unable to remove my eyes from the hideous thing that came wriggling towards me. When within two or three feet of me he lay flat and wriggled off to the right, and now turned so that his face was towards the opening, his feet towards me. Was it possible that the clump of docks, the only barrier between us, had kept him from seeing me? What did it mean? If he did not know I was there, why had he come? Or was he only doing this to torture me the more? A great fit of trembling seized me, and I shivered and shook so that some rotten twigs and sticks I was sitting on crunched and rattled beneath me. At this the huge head turned, and the fierce eyes rolled searchingly about the little place. Then I thought my last hour had come.

Half fainting, I closed my eyes and waited,



"I THOUGHT MY LAST HOUR HAD COME."

surely vanishing, and every moment it got lighter and lighter. I knew well whom the "coo-ee" belonged to, but try as I would I could not utter a sound in reply. Besides, I knew very well that, the moment I did so, the owner of those deep, fierce breaths would be upon me before I had time to show myself to my rescuers. It became so light now that I could discern every object round me quite plainly. Someone was shouting my name. I could also hear the crashing and crackling getting nearer and nearer.

And then a thing happened that will haunt me to my last hour. For there, crawling on all

expecting to be dragged out, the end then quickly following. I had screwed myself into such a small compass, and so tightly had I jammed myself in my terror between the bark and bank, that it became an utter impossibility for him to do other than stretch out his hands and drag me out. For at this point the space from ground to bridge was too small to admit of so huge a body as his.

So I waited, my eyes still closed, the blood apparently frozen in my veins, my heart seeming as though it had stopped beating, and that I was already as one dead. Hours appeared to pass, which were really only seconds. Still

he had not touched me, neither was there a sound. All was silent as the grave. I opened my eyes and looked. What could it mean? Was I really dead, or dreaming? There he was, in the same position he had taken up on entering, his eyes no longer searching the place, but intently watching the opening. And, yes, there were voices—someone was talking. With bated breath I listened. Then I knew what had happened. In the darkness, and owing to the flood, he must have deemed it impossible that I could have hidden beneath the bridge; then, as it grew lighter, in his cunning found it might be possible, and so began his search.

Hearing the "coo-ees," and knowing that they belonged to people from the station in search of me, he gave one piercing glance round, and, not seeing me, he thought only of himself and the vengeance that would be assuredly meted out to him. If he were found there, suspicion must fall on him. Would he not be missed from among the hands when they were called up to look for me? It was a revolting sight to watch this cowardly ruffian. On hearing the voices so close, he twisted and coiled himself into a loathsome heap, his teeth chattering, his flesh quivering, and he shrank back, crashing down the clump of docks that had hidden me so faithfully.

The talking got fainter and fainter. Realizing this, and what awaited me if he only turned his head the eighth of an inch, my horror was such that I could not utter a sound or even move a finger. In those few moments I seemed to live a lifetime. Why he did not hear my breathing is beyond my comprehension, seeing that I could easily have touched him with my hand. He seemed to have entirely forgotten my existence in his terror at the consequences of being caught there. When the voices had ceased he crawled back to his previous position, his eyes still fastened on the opening. I felt now that I must go raving mad if this continued much longer. As I lay, my reason slowly, but surely, forsaking me, someone spoke.

Dear Heaven! how it all comes back to me, and with what gratitude and love do I recall the owner of that dear voice, and will, till the end of time! For it was the voice of my old host, who was calling out in trembling accents, "Maude, for the love of God, if you are anywhere near, answer me!"

Then they were not gone—they were there, there, almost in reach of my hand, and yet I dared not call. Then in my desire to escape from this horror at all costs, and taking courage from hearing the voices, I became cunning, and did as he had done. I lay flat and wriggled along till my head was almost on a level with

his head. My feelings can be better imagined than described as I thus lay. Then, with a superhuman effort, I quickly and stealthily gathered myself to my feet, and in a half-stooping position (for I could not stand upright) dashed through the opening into the water.

With a muttered oath, the huge savage stretched out his hand and caught fiercely at my hair, dragging me back till my head rested on the bank, my face upturned. For an instant my eyes gazed into his eyes, then, uttering a piercing scream, I fainted.

When I came to myself I was being borne hurriedly along in someone's arms, a great talking and clattering going on all round me. Then all became dark again, and I knew nothing more for eight long weeks. When I then recovered, my health was broken and my nerves all but destroyed by a dangerous attack of brain fever. And indeed, even to this day, my nerves are a constant misery to me.

It was not till six months afterwards that I was considered well enough to be told the particulars of my rescue. It appeared that my hostess, who slept soundly, did not awake and miss me till some time between three and four o'clock, so that I must have been fully two hours going through my dreadful experiences. Seeing my empty bed, and knowing that I walked in my sleep, she quickly took in the situation. Throwing on her dressing-gown, she came out, thinking that she would find me somewhere about the house or grounds. Then, after about ten minutes' hunt, finding that there was no trace of me and becoming alarmed, she roused the household, who very quickly were searching in all directions. None of them seemed to think of going to the creek. They kept hunting about near the homestead, till one of the sons of my host, who was carrying a lantern, noticed a naked footprint in the soft mud; for there had been a shower early in the evening. Following this up, he came on another and yet another, mingling with other and larger footprints. At the sight of these other and larger footprints he became bewildered and anxious. Calling to the others he showed them to them, who in their turn became equally affected, and did not know what to make of it. Were they my footsteps, and if so, what were the others doing intermingling with them? Something dreadful had indeed happened.

After a few minutes' consultation, they one and all agreed that I had been followed, whether awake or asleep, by someone, they knew not whither.

Following the footsteps, they ran along, now and again "coo-eeing" so that if I were anywhere near I should know that help was at hand. On

they went, till they traced them to the brink of the creek. Then all trace of them vanished. At this point they thought I was, indeed, drowned or that something dreadful had befallen me, when my old host suggested going

was fast breaking day), they noticed a piece of embroidery, which had been torn from my night-dress, adhering to a thistle close by the bridge.

My hostess, on catching sight of it, cried to



"HE DRAGGED ME BACK TILL MY HEAD RESTED ON THE BANK."

the other side. This they did, and came again upon the footsteps, tracing them through the thistles and back again, where the smaller ones ceased finally this time, and only the larger ones were to be seen, as though the owner of them had been running up and down the bank in search of someone or something. Then they, too, ended, and search as they would, not another clue could they find. The men had begun to search farther down, and my old host and hostess, in despair, were about to follow them, when, in the grey light (for it

her husband that it belonged to me. Then it was that he called to me to answer if I were anywhere near. And my scream, almost immediately following, brought them, together with the men, who came running back, to the brink, to see nothing but the tips of two fingers of two hands sinking beneath the water just below where they stood. Several of the men hastily sprang in, the foremost among them catching and bringing me to the bank—dead, as they thought. As for the Queenslander, he was never seen or heard of again.